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Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance: participation of volunteers, "White Helmets", in activities of the United Nations in the field of humanitarian relief, rehabilitation and technical cooperation for development

The "White Helmets" initiative

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly, in its resolutions 49/139 B of 20 December 1994 and 50/19 of 28 November 1995, called on the United Nations Volunteers (UNV), a programme administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, together with the entire United Nations system, to encourage the use of the expertise available through the "White Helmets" initiative. Such expertise, which is provided on a stand-by team basis from various national volunteer corps, is to support activities in humanitarian emergency assistance and in the transition from relief to rehabilitation, reconstruction and longer-term development.

2. In resolution 50/19, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to it at its fifty-second session on the technical, institutional and financial viability of the White Helmets initiative. The present report has been prepared pursuant to that request.

II. Background

3. As the originator of the White Helmets initiative, the Government of Argentina established the Comisión de Lucha Contra el Hambre y la Pobreza [Commission to Combat Hunger and Poverty] in 1993, which was transformed into the Comisión Cascos Blancos [White Helmets Commission]. The Commission and UNV have collaborated closely in the elaboration of the White Helmets initiative and in developing a workable model within the framework envisaged by the General Assembly in resolution 49/139 B. As the operational arm, the UNV programme has brought to bear its 25 years of experience, its volunteer recruitment network and its support mechanism to ensure the effective implementation of the initiative.

4. In the relatively brief period since its establishment, the White Helmets initiative has developed into a valuable and cost-effective mechanism to support the operational capacity of the United Nations system. Thus far, 40 countries have established national focal points on White Helmets. The initiative has enhanced opportunities for creative

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programme design, formulation and implementation, which have enabled planners to better tailor responses to meet the specific needs of different country situations. Projects have been carried out in some 15 countries throughout Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe, ranging from disaster relief in Lebanon and Peru, support for demobilization and demining in Angola and sanitation and education services in Equatorial Guinea and Paraguay.

5. UNV and the White Helmets initiative have encouraged the use of volunteer teams in roles that go beyond the early stages of emergency response. The teams are deployed in response to requests from individual Governments for assistance and are organized to complement ongoing efforts and activities. The White Helmet teams are often linked to national non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations and other civil society organizations in order to facilitate a participatory approach and to increase local capacity.

6. Furthermore, within the context of capacity-building, the UNV programme has introduced a national UNV scheme in a majority of White Helmet initiative interventions, deploying combined teams of international and UNV/White Helmet volunteers. The purpose is to develop the capacity of the White Helmets Commission and other participating national volunteer corps to work in concert with the United Nations system in the areas of humanitarian relief, rehabilitation and development.

III. Experience gained

7. United Nations operations in humanitarian emergencies have intensified in recent years. Activities now undertaken extend beyond immediate relief and often include such areas as restoration of infrastructure and social services, conflict prevention and resolution, human rights monitoring, electoral processes and administration and management. In this connection, White Helmet resources can complement and strengthen United Nations humanitarian activities in a given country. Experience has shown that an added value of the White Helmets initiative is its capability to offer qualified human resources as part of trained and integrated teams.

8. In collaboration with United Nations entities such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), UNV and the White Helmets Commission have undertaken a diverse range of activities utilizing teams of national and international volunteers. The examples below summarize activities undertaken to date:

(a) *Angola*. At the present time, a project is under way, in collaboration with the Humanitarian Aid Coordination Unit of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, to help strengthen the demobilization programme. White Helmet teams are deployed to support the demobilization of war disabled and under-age soldiers and the dependants of military personnel within the quartering areas. The White Helmets also support efforts to ensure that family groups settled in the vicinity of the quartering areas will receive food, health care and water assistance, as well as basic assistance for temporary accommodation;

(b) *Argentina*. A regional development feasibility study on improved water use and management was undertaken jointly with UNV and Israeli volunteers;

(c) *Armenia*. A team of UNV and White Helmets participated as electoral monitors in the joint United Nations/Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) observer mission in July 1995. Following an assessment mission to the Goris region in December 1995, a full-scale urban self-sustainable food production project, consisting of international and national UNVs and White Helmets commenced in April 1996, in time for the growing season. The success of the project has led to additional related programme opportunities, with the participation of WFP and international non-governmental organizations, which extend into other regions of the country;

(d) *Bolivia*. In collaboration with UNDP, WFP and the Ministry of Health, a project in support of the Southern Cone initiative for the elimination of triatoma infestation from dwellings and control of transfusional disease was completed in June 1997;

(e) *Haiti*. In collaboration with WFP and local authorities, two teams composed of national and international UNVs and White Helmets have developed a commodity tracking system to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of food aid distribution in Haiti. The outputs produced included enhanced methods and practices for the delivery of food aid from ports of entry through distribution systems to an increased number of delivery points, as well as strengthened national capacity for receiving, handling, distributing and tracking food aid. With funding from Argentina and France, and in collaboration with UNDP and the French non-governmental organization Inter Aide, the White Helmets are also participating in a rural potable water system project, which aims to provide water to inhabitants

in selected rural areas, as well as related primary health care and social services, in order to address issues of hygiene and sanitation among the target population;

(f) *Jamaica*. A project relating to medical equipment in public hospitals was completed in early 1996. It assisted the Government of Jamaica in strengthening the capacity of its medical technicians to implement an emergency repair and preventive maintenance through a component of on-the-job training;

(g) *Lebanon*. In response to the consolidated inter-agency flash appeal of April 1996 for humanitarian needs in Lebanon, logistical assistance was provided in connection with Argentina's contribution of food, medicines and other humanitarian relief materials;

(h) *Paraguay*. A multisectoral project to strengthen nutrition, public health, water and sanitation and vaccination programmes was launched in July 1997 in the Alto Vera district to assist indigenous peoples. The project is being implemented through a participatory approach involving national and international UNVs and White Helmets, US Peace Corps volunteers, non-governmental organizations and municipal governments;

(i) *Palestinian Occupied Territories*. Based on a needs assessment mission, a two-phased project providing support to the City Planning Department of the Municipality of Gaza was launched in June 1995, with volunteers assisting in urban land use planning, water and sewerage facilities, traffic engineering and system automation for planning Gaza City. The project also aims at strengthening the institutional capacity of the Municipality and upgrading the skills of national counterparts. In March 1997, a project was launched aimed at developing and providing support to the sports sector in Gaza and the West Bank. The project utilizes sports as a vehicle for the social development of Palestinian youth. A team of UNVs and White Helmets are working with local youth and community clubs at the grass-roots level to encourage participation in sports. In collaboration with UNV, UNDP and WHO, a large-scale programme supporting brucellosis control and eradication has been launched. Funding for this undertaking is being provided through contributions from the Governments of Argentina, Japan and Spain and will include teams of UNV and White Helmets.

9. In addition to the above-mentioned joint UNV/White Helmet projects, the White Helmets Commission of Argentina has directly supported the following activities:

(a) *Angola (rural demining)*. A project sponsored jointly by the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, Argentina and Italy and executed by the United Nations Office for Project Services commenced in August 1997. The project provides technical assistance in demining through two White Helmet specialists from Argentina and two demining supervisors from Italy. Arrangements have also been concluded recently for the provision of two further demining supervisors;

(b) *Costa Rica/Nicaragua (natural disaster relief)*. The White Helmets Commission provided emergency assistance to the people of Costa Rica and Nicaragua in response to an appeal from the United nations and with the support of the UNDP country offices. Both countries, which had been struck by Hurricane Caesar, benefited from the contribution of food aid, medicines, generators and tools to rebuild damaged infrastructure. A project to provide sanitation systems is being considered as a follow-up activity;

(c) *Ecuador (natural disaster relief)*. Local authorities were provided with humanitarian assistance, through the White Helmets Commission, to the victims (15,000 inhabitants) of the earthquake that hit the province of Cotopaxi in 1996;

(d) *Equatorial Guinea (education)*. Assistance to the education sector was provided through technical assistance in curriculum development, training of educators in modern teaching methodologies and the in-kind contribution of training materials;

(e) *Peru (natural disaster relief)*. An emergency assistance mission was undertaken by the White Helmets Commission in response to an appeal for assistance from the Government of Peru following the damage caused by the Nazca earthquake in November 1996. Humanitarian assistance provided included blankets, temporary shelters, water-purification tablets and other relief items. A follow-up project to reconstruct infrastructure is in preparation;

(f) *Rwanda (emergency relief)*. In response to the United Nations consolidated inter-agency appeal of January 1997, an emergency airlift of humanitarian relief items was undertaken by the White Helmets Commission in cooperation with UNHCR and UNDP.

IV. Financing

10. As stipulated in General Assembly resolution 49/139 B, UNV has established a separate account, or a special window, within its Special Voluntary Fund to receive and administer funds for UNV/White Helmet activities. To date a total of $2,441,915 has been received (of which

$2,331,915 has been committed and approximately $1.5 million expended) from the Governments of Argentina, France and Germany. Several Governments have provided human resources and a number of others have expressed interest in providing cash contributions. Furthermore, in response to further needs and requests, UNV, in collaboration with the White Helmets Commission, is currently finalizing projects that will require additional funding of approximately $2 million. Additionally, the Governments of Argentina, Italy and Saudi Arabia have directly financed several other White Helmet activities through the Commission.

11. The viability of the White Helmets initiative and the sustainability of its achievements to date are ultimately predicated on the availability of additional funds for future activities. It should be noted, in this connection, that funds can be contributed either by the public sector, Member States or international organizations, directly or through the consolidated inter-agency appeal process, or by the private sector, through individual or institutional donations.

V. Institutional arrangements

12. All UNV/White Helmet projects are implemented within the framework of humanitarian assistance and development programmes of United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations, or in support of coordination activities of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs. With regard to the institutional framework created for the White Helmets initiative, various national White Helmet corps operate in partnership with the UNV programme in response to country-specific assistance priorities.

13. The UNV programme maintains a roster of several thousand candidates from major occupational groups subdivided into professional categories and takes into account additional elements such as nationality, gender and language skills.

14. Volunteers selected to participate in White Helmet activities serve under the same conditions of service, rules and regulations as other UNV programme staff.

15. In the performance of their duties, volunteers come under the overall administrative supervision of the United Nations resident coordinator in the country of assignment.

16. UNV, working through the UNV programme officer assigned to the UNDP country office, provides the required field support and management of UNV/White Helmet volunteers. Substantive technical backstopping, including work planning and implementation, continues to be provided by the United Nations organizations concerned or host national institutions to which White Helmet volunteers are assigned.

17. In its resolutions 49/139 B and 50/19, the General Assembly recommended the development and strengthening of linkages with national entities. In that context several UNV/White Helmet projects have endeavoured to mobilize existing local expertise through the recruitment of national teams of volunteers. In a number of instances (Angola, Armenia, Haiti and Paraguay), the projects were able to build on the experiences of local non-governmental, community-based and other civil society organizations. National capacities for volunteer service continue to be promoted and strengthened for use on a national and regional basis.

VI. Concluding observations

18. Through a broad range of programmes, the White Helmets initiative has proved to be an increasingly valuable mechanism in facilitating the identification and recruitment of skilled and integrated volunteer teams in support of activities of the United Nations system. It has, within a short period of time, developed from an idea into a functioning capacity in support of international assistance and mobilization efforts throughout the world. The initiative brings a wide range of expertise into areas stricken by disasters and crises throughout the world. It allows those resources to be organized according to requirements in each country setting, while providing a critical link to building local capacity. This capacity may in turn be drawn upon for crises elsewhere.

19. Member States are encouraged to examine opportunities for further application of this mechanism and to offer suitably qualified candidates with a view to strengthening further the human resource base of the UNV/White Helmets programme.

20. For the programme to be able to continue its efforts and reinforce its achievements, however, additional funds will be required. It is hoped, therefore, that contributions to the special window of the Special Voluntary Fund will be forthcoming from both Governments and private sources.

21. The potential contribution of the UNV/White Helmets to preventive action, in particular in the humanitarian and development field as well as in the context of peace-building efforts following a conflict, deserves to be explored further. There is a need to build upon this unique and cost-effective mechanism.